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ABSTRACT

A planned sequence of general studies at Saint Mary-of-the-Woods College, entitled "The Link," is described. The Link addresses problems that were identified in three recent major studies of the college curriculum. Quotations from these national studies are included under seven categories of problems. Approaches to solving these problems are identified. The problem areas are: (1) students' difficulties in becoming independent learners; (2) too little structure in the general studies curriculum; (3) students' learning too little history, philosophy, languages, and literature needed to analyze and solve contemporary problems; (4) students' avoiding courses that develop analytical, problem-solving, and communication abilities; (5) inadequate writing and speaking skills; (6) lack of faculty responsibility for the curriculum as a whole; and (7) students' passivity as learners. The Link, which has a strong humanities foundation, is a developmental sequence of courses extending through all four years. In addition to learning content knowledge, students study learning methods approach to the following areas: social/cultural, aesthetic, scientific, and philosophical or religious. Faculty are trained to teach both writing skills and speaking skills while teaching their own disciplines. A list of the Link course requirements concludes the document. (SW)

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THE LINK
A Planned Sequence of General Studies

AT SAINT MARY-OF-THE-WOODS COLLEGE...
WE ANSWERED THE EDUCATIONAL QUESTIONS OF 1985
...IN 1981

"More help, at least in the development of a new kind of program, will come I think from smaller colleges, and may be, especially, those in the middle west."

Elting E. Morison, Professor Emeritus
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Response to "The New Liberal Arts,"
an Occasional Paper of the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation

HIGHER EDUCATION - THE POTENTIAL, THE DISAPPOINTMENT, AND THE LINK BETWEEN

During the last year three major studies of the curriculum of American colleges and universities* have been published and the results of those studies have found their way into the popular press, leading to a spate of negative publicity about what students do not learn in college.

Almost every week there is a new article somewhere about the declining value of a college degree, or about how students with a degree cannot perform the simplest mathematical functions, or do not know the simplest bit of common information about their history, or cannot read or write or speak.

At Saint Mary-of-the-Woods we have watched these articles with increasing frustration. Almost everything they say is wrong with education is not wrong at Saint Mary-of-the-Woods College. Because we are small, because we are a community of teachers with some common understanding of how students should be educated, able to work together to revise our programs and curriculum as new forces come to bear on our society, and particularly because we have a faculty committed primarily to teaching rather than to research and publishing, we continue to offer a degree of excellence to our students.

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We have The Link...

Long before these studies brought to the attention of the general public the problems of higher education, faculty at The Woods were designing a unique and rigorous general studies sequence, called The Link, to address the very issues that now suddenly have exploded onto center stage, nationally.

But it is very hard to get that word cut. "Small is beautiful" but it does not have a powerful voice, and there is a mindset that leadership in education will always come from the large institutions, even though history shows over and over that those

institutions are too fraught with bureaucratic tangle to try new and creative approaches to solve problems. However, like David, we think we have some power and we know we have some new and effective ideas. Therefore, below are listed some of the ways, through our new general studies curriculum, The Link, that we have successfully dealt with the very same issues of education that seem to have overpowered others.

*"Involvement in Learning" by the Study Group on the Conditions of Excellence in American Higher Education, sponsored by the National Institute of Education, "To Reclaim a Legacy" by William J. Bennett, based on findings of the Study Group on the State of Learning in the Humanities in Higher Education, and "Integrity in the College Curriculum" by the Committee on the Project on Redefining the Meaning and Purpose of Baccalaureate Degrees, sponsored by the Association of American Colleges.

Problem 1: College students are not well-equipped by their high school experiences to make the transition to the more independent kind of learning that will be expected of them in college and, if they are not early led to become independent learners by intellectually stimulating teachers and modes of teaching, they often become passive and uninvolved.

> "...the problems of undergraduate education [cannot] be separated from those of elementary and secondary schools..."
> "Integrity in the College Curriculum"

> "Classes for first-year students should be designed to provide adequate opportunities for intense intellectual interaction between students and instructors."
> "Involvement in Learning"

> "Colleges...must guarantee that first-year students have access to a stable body of well-trained advisors, including faculty, administrators, and peers..."
> "Involvement in Learning"

> "Students must learn to make real choices, assume responsibility for their decisions, be comfortable with their own behavior, and know why."
> "Integrity in the College Curriculum"

At Saint Mary-of-the-Woods College:

As the first step in The Link sequence, students are placed in a Life/Learning Course, which is geared toward assisting them to make the important transition to independent learning and living patterns.

Taught by top level faculty and staff using a clearly defined subject matter and reading list, the course is organized so that students will develop three learning skills: critical reading, critical thinking and effective study. It also focuses directly on three life skills which contribute to the development of the student as a learner. The first of these is the ability to look at complex issues from many sides without looking for a simple right-or-wrong, yes-or-no answer. The second is the ability to approach relationships - from roommates to community groups to the world - with responsibility and with empathy for the situation and feelings of others. These skills are reinforced with the third skill, that of self awareness.

To deal with these skills in an active way, the course introduces students to a four-step model of problem solving, which is consistently underscored throughout the curriculum and the student's life. It uses a highly participative mode, which includes case studies, role playing, journal writing and individual and group analysis of problems.

In most colleges, responsibility for students' extra-curricular activities is directed by a staff of persons with advanced degrees in personnel, counseling, psychology and human development. In an unusual break with tradition, these staff members at The Woods join with faculty in teaching this course, therefore providing the student an especially strong introduction to college level learning.

Experience thus far shows that it is an unusually effective course, providing students a coherent, confident sense of who they are and where they are headed in college.

Problem 2: There is very little structure in the general studies curriculum. Since the concept and content of a core of learning that all students must master has become fuzzy - indeed more the subject of political compromise than intellectual agreement among faculty members - the result is that students have been offered a choice of a range of courses in a range of fields, rather than a central core of learning.

> "The curriculum has given way to a marketplace philosophy: it is a supermarket where students are shoppers and professors are merchants of learning. Fads and fashions, the demands of popularity and success enter where wisdom and experience should prevail. The institutional course requirements outside the major...lack a rationale and cohesion or, even worse, are almost lacking altogether."
>
> "Integrity in the College Curriculum"

> "The curriculum [is] no longer a statement about what knowledge matter[s]; instead it [has become] the product of a political compromise among competing schools and departments overlaid by marketing considerations."
>
> "To Reclaim a Legacy"

> "The interests of students demonstrated by their selection of courses have increasingly helped to shape what has been taught, why and how. What is now going on is almost anything, and it goes on in the name of the Bachelor's Degree."
>
> "Integrity in the College Curriculum"

At Saint Mary-of-the-Woods College:

The basic principle informing The Link is that learning is a step by step process which builds from mastering basic skills and exploring the way in which scholars view the world to integrating knowledge and experience. Since the faculty has been trained to understand the processes as well the content of learning, they have given a good deal of attention in designing the program, not just to the content, but to the way that content is presented to achieve the highest level of student learning.

All students who enter college at Saint Mary-of-the-Woods must go through The Link. Its carefully designed developmental sequence of courses covers approximately 50% of the total course load and, rather than being concentrated in the first two years, is spread out over the student's entire course of study. It cannot, therefore, be simply "gotten out of the way," as so many required courses are, but permeates the student's learning experience from freshman to senior year. Courses have been created step by step, each passing the approval of the entire faculty and demonstrating in prepared coursebooks the ways in which they fit the objectives of The Link.

Problem 3: Students learn too little history, philosophy, languages and literature, with which to analyze and solve contemporary problems, and they frequently never achieve a coherent grasp of what they know and how to use it...

> "Many of our colleges and universities have lost a clear sense of the importance of the humanities and the purpose of education, allowing the thickness of their catalogues to substitute for vision and a philosophy of education."
> "To Reclaim a Legacy"

> "Too many students are graduating from American colleges and universities lacking even the most rudimentary knowledge about the history, literature, art, and philosophical foundations of their nation and their civilization."
> "To Reclaim a Legacy"

At Saint Mary-of-the-Woods College:

The Link is built upon a strong humanities foundation with a unique difference: it prepares students to be twenty-first century humanists, who will need to constantly and rapidly expand their knowledge base, rather than nineteenth century humanists, who needed to be primarily specialists in existing knowledge. It is traditional in requiring some 35 hours in the humanities. However, instead of using surveys, it concentrates, after the student has been required to master certain basic skills of learning, not only on studying the content of the classics of human knowledge, but of studying distinct methods of learning appropriate to four specific areas of human knowledge: social/cultural, aesthetic, scientific, and religious/philosophical.

Finally, when students have a basis of knowledge and some experience in applying it in different ways, it teaches the student how to synthesize. This is done through two capstone courses,* offered in the junior and senior years. These courses are designed to bring some closure to the student's educational sequence, linking the introductory Life/Learning course with the advanced-level Life Issues courses. These courses, through research and case studies calling for analysis and problem solving, require students to bring to bear both the content and methodology they have learned through The Link. Subject matter for the Life Issues courses deals with selected contemporary life issues especially those with an international dimension, such as human rights, economic justice, world population, the theory of revolution, etc. Since their emphasis is toward synthesis, they are taught by faculty from several disciplines.

*These courses have not yet been offered, since the program has been unfolded sequentially.

Problem 4: Because students tend to choose courses that they perceive to be of immediate "use" to them, they often resist courses with more long term goals but which develop important capacities of analysis, problem solving, communication, and synthesis, therefore never mastering those skills.

> "According to a 1978 survey of 208 colleges and universities that had engaged in institutional self-studies...only one in three had generated or examined data on student learning and growth...and only 14 percent had looked at their students' mental development (e.g., their analytic, synthesizing, and problem-solving capacities).
>
> "Involvement in Learning"

> "Another consequence of the accelerating decline of the undergraduate degree is widespread contemporary skepticism about the quality of high education. There is a public sense that standards are too low, that results are not what they used to be...To reason well, to recognize when reason and evidence are not enough, to discover the legitimacy of intuition, to subject inert data to the probing analysis of the mind - these are the primary experiences required of the undergraduate course of study...
>
> "Integrity in the College Curriculum"

At Saint Mary-of-the-Woods College:

The whole of The Link sequence is geared toward giving students not only what they want but what faculty believe they need. The College has enunciated and the faculty has reinforced four consistent characteristics of liberal education that inform the totality of the curriculum here. They agree that a) it must be moral, b) it must unite student's experiences rather than fragment them, c) it must promote lifelong learning and d) it must be useful.

a) To have any course in any discipline approved by the Curriculum Committee, the faculty member recommending it must prove that it provides a forum for dealing with the moral and values-related questions appropriate to that subject matter.

b) Particularly in the first two years, students may have difficulty putting together the many things they learn, making connections and making sense of the whole of their experience. Courses for The Link are specifically designed to mesh with each other in ways that foster making connections, examining the student's links to the world around, and promoting the vision of a single person capable of dealing with a complex world from a unified base of liberal skills and knowledge.

c) Students are assisted to be effective life-long learners by requiring of them the mastery of learning skills and methods rather than requiring of them only the study of a finite subject matter. Mastering a subject matter makes one a specialist in that field - an important need in a more static era of history. Mastering the skills of continual learning makes one able to operate effectively in a rapidly changing era of history.

d) Students' learning is "useful" over a longer term because it emphasizes the personal and professional abilities of an educated person, e.g., strong communications skills, an ability to deal with intercultural issues, etc. This emphasis prepares the student for a variety of experiences and for growth in them, rather than for a narrow, soon lost, specialty.

Problem 5: The development of students' writing and speaking skills has been woefully inadequate, often being concentrated in only one or two introductory level courses.

> "The business community complains of difficulty in recruiting literate college graduates. Remedial programs, designed to compensate for lack of skill in using the English language, abound in the colleges and in the corporate world."
>
> "Integrity in the College Curriculum"

> "The reform of liberal education must be based on collaboration among faculty from different departments, such as that which occurs when faculty from all disciplines work together to improve the substance, coherence, and persuasive power of student writing..."
>
> "Involvement in Learning"

At Saint Mary-of-the-Woods College:

Through two funded programs, Writing-Across-the-Curriculum and Speaking-Across-the-Curriculum, we have specially trained about 75% of our faculty to teach both writing skills and speaking skills while they are teaching their own disciplines. We now place all of our students, not only in an introductory writing course and an introductory speaking course, but also in Writing Intensive courses and Speech Emphasis courses. Students therefore receive consistent and progressive practice in writing and speaking throughout the curriculum.

Problem 6: The faculty as a whole are not corporately responsible for the curriculum as a whole, but only for their own specialization.

> "Faculty curriculum committees suffer from chronic paralysis...Hardly ever do they consider in any systematic way the curricular structure as a whole or seriously ask whether the curriculum as experienced by a student meets either the institution's defined goals or general goals that are rational, socially healthy and appropriate."
>
> "Integrity in the College Curriculum"

> "Most American colleges and universities award their degrees when students have accumulated a given number of credits...Credits are measures of time and performance, but they do not indicate the academic worth of course content. In too many instances, quality control in the assignment of credits is problematic
>
> "Involvement in Learning"

At Saint Mary-of-the-Woods College:

The Link was organized, proposed, developed, evaluated, and is presently being taught, by faculty members from across all the disciplines of the College who collaborated in its initial development and are involved fully in its implementation and ongoing evaluation. It is accurate to say that all the members of the faculty have been involved in some way, with 75% involved on a continuing basis, and that this involvement is enthuasiastic and whole-hearted.

One of the major problems of recent years has been the tendency to fragment the student's experience into two major portions: that which occurs in the classroom and that which occurs outside, making it difficult for students to synthesize what they learn with what they experience. To counter that problem, in a unique joint effort, responsibility for some of The Link curriculum is shared by professional members of the student life staff, those professionals responsible for that portion of the student's college experience which is outside the classroom. Such collaboration is very unusual in academia, possibly even unique, yet seems to hold the key to seeing the student's life and experience as a totality, rather than a separation of in-class and out-of-class, curricular and extra-curricular experience.

Problem 7: Students seem to be very litle involved in the process of learning, but are passive recipients, yet studies show that much more learning occurs when students are actively engaged...

> "Uninvolved students may neglect studies, spend little time on campus, abstain from extracurricular activites, have little contact with faculty members or other students, and otherwise participate little in institutional life...Traditional classroom teaching practices in high education favor the assertive student...Our analysis indicates that instructors should give greater attention to the passive or reticent student."
>
> "Involvement in Learning"

At Saint Mary-of-the-Woods College:

The development of The Link clearly illustrates that the College is an innovator and the faculty are not afraid to take risks. Therefore, new modes of teaching and learning are constantly being tried, with full student participation, but with faculty leadership. (Not only The Link sequence, but the Writing-Across-the-Curriculum and Speaking-Across-the-Curriculum programs, plus the computer-use philosophy developed college wide, are very good examples of this).

This interrelationship creates an environment of working together both in and outside the classroom. Classes frequently use the case study method or similar methods which fully involve the student in the learning process, and faculty and student affairs personnel frequently interact together with students on both academic and non-academic projects.

For instance, students learn that the critical skills used in analyzing a social problem may also be used to analyze a work of literature...students not only study a play as literature, they must also serve on the production crew, or in the cast...students not only study art, they are asked to try to produce it, giving them a perspective on the artist as well as the piece of art.

ONE FINAL AFTERWORD...

A further unique characteristic of The Link is that it has been designed from the beginning to be taught, not only to traditional college-age students in the residential program, but to be taught to older, returning college students in the External Degree program offered at the College. So often programs for older students are simply adaptations of already existing courses and do not consciously take into consideration the different kinds of needs, given the age and experience differential, that the returning student has.

Courses in The Link are designed to be delivered in two different delivery systems to two very different sets of students, yet retain the basic criteria arrived at after long, difficult, yet fruitful discussion and decision-making by the faculty.

Contact: Kathryn Edwards, Director of College Relations, Saint Mary-of-the-Woods College, Terre Haute, IN 47876 (812) 535-5104.

THE LINK COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Skills for Advanced Learning		
3	Interdisc.	Life/Learning Skills
3	English	Writing I (Can test out)
3	English	Writing II
3	Theatre Arts	Fund. of Speech (Can test into advanced course)
3	Mathematics	Fund. of Mathematics (Can test into adv. course)
2	Computer Science	Intro. to Computers (Can test out)
1	Physical Educ.	General Fitness
1	Physical Educ.	Phys. Ed. Elective
3	Foreign Lang.	Basic Foreign Language I
3	Foreign Lang.	Basic Foreign Language II
3	Foreign Lang.	Basic Foreign Language III
or 3	Foreign Lang.	Intermediate Lang. I
3	Foreign Lang.	Intermediate Lang. II
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Distributive Studies

Aesthetic Mode of Inquiry:

3	Music	Studies in Music
3	Art	Studies in the Visual Arts

(Choose one of the two above)

3	English	Studies in Literature and Theatre

Social/Cultural Mode of Inquiry:

3	Business	Business Spectra
3	Social Science	Economics and Societal Choices
3	Political Sc.	Science of Politics
3	History	Myths and Realities: The U.S. as a World Power

(Choose two of the four above)

Scientific Mode of Inquiry:

3	Biology	Our Bodies, Our World
3	Chemistry	Chem. in a Changing Society
3	Physics	Conceptual Physics

(Choose two of the three above)

Religious/Philosophical Mode of Inquiiry:

3	Religion	Theology and the Human Exp.
3	Religion	Religion Elective
3	Philosophy	The Activity of Philosophy
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Integrative Studies

4	Interdisc.
4	Interdisc.

*Course Books for these classes are available for review on request